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***The Jungle* (1906) assignment**

In his novel *The Jungle*, American author Upton Sinclair exposed working conditions in Chicago’s meat-packing industry. Sinclair, a socialist, did not believe that business owners left to themselves would act responsibly. He hoped that his novel would inspire readers to take action to improve the lives of workers.

But the public was far more horrified by Sinclair’s descriptions of how its meat was being processed in factories. After the novel’s publication, sales of American meat plummeted, and European countries refused to import meat packaged in the United States. *The Jungle* raised such an outcry that President Theodore Roosevelt called for an investigation of the meat-packing industry. He appointed two men to independently document the conditions in the meat packing plants, and both reported that Sinclair’s depiction was accurate. A horrified Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906. An agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce — later named the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA — now for the first time had the power to regulate the production of foods sold nationwide.

*The Jungle* is an example of “muckraker” journalism, which became popular in the early twentieth century. A “muckraker” was someone who dug up dirt — or raked up mud — to expose social and political evils. Journalists often exaggerated their findings to create public outrage and effect social change. The following reading is an “enhanced” selection from Chapter 14.

With one member trimming beef in a cannery, and another working in a sausage factory, the family had first-hand knowledge of the great majority of the swindles. It was the custom, they found, whenever meat was so spoiled that it could not be used for anything else, it was either canned or chopped into sausage. With what had been told them by Jonas, who had worked in the pickle rooms[[1]](#footnote-1), they could now study the whole of the spoiled-meat industry on the inside, and uncover a new and grim meaning of the jest that the pork industry used everything except the squeal.

Jonas had told them that when the pickled meat would be found sour, workers would often rub it with chemicals to take away the smell and sell it to be eaten on lunch counters. In the pickling of hams they had an ingenious apparatus, by which they saved time and increased the capacity of the plant — a machine consisting of a hollow needle attached to a pump. By plunging this needle into the meat and working with his foot, a man could fill a ham with pickle juice in a few seconds. And yet, in spite of this, there would be hams found spoiled, some of them with an odor so bad that a man could hardly bear to be in the room with them. As a result, packers would use a second and much stronger pickling agent which destroyed the odor — a process known to the workers as “giving them thirty per cent.” After the hams had been smoked, there would still be some that had gone bad. Formerly these had been sold as “Number Three Grade,” but then some ingenious person invented a device which would extract the bone, about which the bad part generally lay, and insert into the hole a white-hot iron. After this invention there was no longer Number One, Two, and Three Grade meat — there was only Number One Grade. The packers were always creating new products —called “boneless hams,” which were all the odds and ends of pork stuffed into casings; “California hams,” which were the shoulders, with big knuckle joints, and nearly all the meat cut out; and fancy “skinned hams,” which were made of the oldest hogs, whose skins were so heavy and coarse that no one would buy them — that is, until they had been cooked and chopped fine and labeled “head cheese!”

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into Elzbieta’s department. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute slicers and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor would survive. There was never any attention paid to what was cut up for sausage. Some would be shipped back from Europe as rejected, being moldy and white. Her department would dose the rejected sausage with borax and glycerine, dump them into the hoppers, and then repackaged for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one — there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage.

There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plant, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that were only done every so often, and among those were the cleaning out the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water — and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public shelters. Some of it they would make into “smoked” sausage — but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it “special,” and for this they would charge two cents more a pound.

Such were the new surroundings in which Elzbieta was placed, and such was the work she was compelled to do. It was stupefying, brutalizing work; it left her no time to think, no strength for anything. She was part of the machine she tended, and every faculty that was not needed for the machine was doomed to be crushed out of existence. There was only one mercy about the cruel grind — that it gave her the gift of insensibility.

**Questions to consider**

1. According to Sinclair, how was rancid meat made to look like it was “Grade A?”
2. How did the company “smoke” meat?
3. What went in to sausages?
4. How was meat stored? What were the problems with storing meat in this way?
5. How did these conditions affect the workers?

1. “Pickling” at this time referred to any means of preserving food in a liquid form by adding salt, acid, and/or chemical preservatives. That included pickling vegetables, but also meats, such as hams, which were “pickled” by being injected with a brine that contained salt and chemicals. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)